Making Research Sociological[1]

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Abstract

Developing a distinctive disciplinary vantage point is crucial to becoming a professional. Thesis writing at the Master's level allows the professional opportunity of thinking and writing independently. For students of Sociology in particular, it is fundamental to recognize that the social is everywhere. There is nothing that is not socially constituted. Further on, a Sociology student should develop the sociological vantage point in order to see how the social is constituted. This the student can do by engaging and 'dialoguing' with well-known sociological theorists. The student will then be able to think about how and why societies are historically constituted, how and why societies are diverse, internally differentiated and hierarchized and how and why societies transform themselves. They will learn to unravel the relationship between different levels of a society. In addition, they will also learn the significance of the structure even as they visualize historical human agents change the structure.

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1. Introduction

Developing a distinctive *disciplinary* vantage point or a 'disciplinary eye' is fundamental to becoming a professional. This does not imply that other vantage points are not valid or that one has to be limited to a particular 'narrow, disciplinary' perspective. One can develop a 'problem-focused' or a broad, interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary perspective as one goes along. Developing any one of these latter perspectives, however, presumes that one can crystallize and view a problematic or a research problem in multiple disciplinary ways in the first place. Only one who can put up a problematic on one's upturned palm, as it were, and rotate it in order to gaze at it from various disciplinary vantage points can really carry out a 'problem-focused,' interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary research. If you do not know the *disciplinary* vantage points to begin with in the first place, how would you visualize the 'problem' in its various manifestations and how would you inter-discipline or multi-discipline it?

2. Discovering the social

During the defense of their Sociology Master's thesis, students are often asked: 'Can you show me where there is *Sociology* here?' Indeed, in many Master's theses it is difficult to show where Sociology makes a definite and visible presence. Sometimes it is difficult to show Sociology in an ostensibly Sociology Ph.D. thesis. In fact, this is the case in many of the research and writing of faculty members as well. Surely, in all these instances, the writing is about *something* vaguely social, i.e. it is about a group of people, about a settlement, about some caste, ethnic, gender and other

groups. Why is the problematic social, however, seldom finds a sustained discussion. But where is the *sociological* there? Could the thesis or the report qualify as such within the discipline of economics rather than sociology? Perhaps, of history? Perhaps, political science *or* journalism *or* public policy, *or* geography? Perhaps some other discipline or several disciplines at once?

Table 1: How were/are the following created and recreated?

	Mode in which 'aspect' was created and recreated									
Aspect of Human Life	**Natu-rally**	**Chemi-cally**	**Biolo-gically**	**Psycho-logically**	**Divi-nely**	**…**	**Soci-ally**	**Divi-nely**	**…**	**Socially**
Soil										
Drinking water										
Climate										
Food grain										
Birth										
Human body										
Fashion										
Reading table										
Poverty										
Prosperity										
'Love' marriage										
'Arranged' marriage										
Ethnicity										
Literacy										
God										
Religion										
Suicide										
Witchcraft										
Conscious-ness										
Knowledge										
Sociology										

The sociological, nonetheless, does *begin* with the social. Indeed, there can be nothing sociological without the social. The discovery of the social is, therefore, the first step in locating and engaging with the sociological.

Let us begin with the *discovery of the social*. Consider the following extended table:

The discovery of the social *begins* with the recognition that the social is *everywhere*. The creation and recreation of *all* 'things', including inanimate, 'natural,' 'biological,' chemical,' 'divine', etc. are, from one vantage point, or at least partially, socially created and recreated. Thus soil (the first item in the table), which is ostensibly the most 'natural' of things, is not completely and fully natural after all. Soil is many other things, too. It is not only nature which creates and recreates it. Of course, the creation or origin of the soil may be said to co-date with the origin of the universe and, in this sense, be said to be primordial and self (or automatically)-generated. Some may even argue that soil is really divinely created. Of course, soil has also been created out of chemical and biological elements or compounds as well. But then, these accounts miss out the fact that soil is also a product of centuries and millennia of human social action. Soil has continually been created and recreated by farmers and farming and social systems through a variety of interventions, e.g. particular forms of land ownership and tenure, systems of soil protection from slippage and water and river damage, erosion control, e.g. by terracing—so ubiquitous in mountainous Nepal, manuring with humus and other plant ingredients, and a variety of other regimes and practices. The point is *not* that soil is a completely social—'and-nothing-else'—product. Soil, as stated earlier, is *also* a social product. There can be no equivocation about it. The point is also that it is incumbent upon a 'sociologist' worth the professional and creative salt, to see the society in the soil. The soil must reek of the society. The soil must reek of the societies which created and recreated it through the millennia and the centuries.

Let us consider a few more illustrative 'aspects' in the table. The third item there is climate. Again, one could have argued, as late as 20 years ago, that climate is nothing but nature. Or

god's output. Or a non-divinely but physically, chemically and biologically created canopy which allows earthlings to have something called life. The equation climate=nature, however, has decisively been shattered with the huge mass of information which show that human beings and their societies have been, during last 400 years in particular, altering climate to such an extent that a significant section of living species, including humans, may well become endangered and extinct because of the humanly and socially generated change. Micro climates, of course, have always been tampered and recreated by human beings, e.g. by means of hair trimming or letting the hair grow long during the winter, clothing, building of homes, plant and farm irrigation, and so on and on.

Let us consider 'love' marriage. Surely, love and love marriage is created psychologically? How else could it be created except psychologically? Don't two people, usually a young man and a young lady, fall in love just naturally and psychologically? Don't the two of them fall for it? What else could be more natural? Of course, one can throw chemistry at love and argue that it is all in the hormones and all the adolescent juices. One could well link it to biology and argue, among many other things, that love marriage is good for reproduction. And finally, one could also see the divine angle there and argue that marriages are made in heaven and that spouses are divinely selected long before they actually come to know of it.

One final illustrative example. Consider ethnicity. Ethnicity is hardly a natural, primordial and permanent or unchanging fixture of a human group and of an 'ethnic' individual--as it is often made out by ethnic activists, including ethnic activists from dominant groups. Ethnicity, instead, is something that is socially—that is, historically and economically, politically and culturally--constructed. Ethnic

categories usually spin off from economic, political and cultural processes. The category of Dalits as well as most other ethnic groups such as the Rai for example are invented, opted and/or awarded. Ethnic groups are sometimes more deliberately created, most often by dominant powers, sometimes to play one off the other. Activists from historically non-dominant groups also create or give inordinate sharpness to ethnicity during periods of broader political and social transition. Certainly, the post-1990 period in Nepal qualifies as a period of such transition.

Birth and human body, religion and god, suicide and witchcraft, and human consciousness--and a particular form of it, Sociology--do not turn out to be created and recreated quite in an automatic, natural, divine, biological or chemical manner either. Human birth is something that, on first appearance, looks to be nothing but natural, divine, and biological. But sociologists regard human birth to be, first and foremost, a social act. Most births take place within marriage, which ties persons within a definite, socially sanctioned union. Even 'illegitimate' births, e.g. births of uncertain paternity, take place under specific social circumstances and rules. How birth is something that remains under severe social control is shown by the rise and fall of birth rates across countries, cultures and historical periods. Had it been (merely or if at all) natural, divine, biological and chemical one could have expected it to remain stable and uniform across time and space. So also with human body, often regarded as something which is entirely natural, divine, biological and chemical. However, to see the body-society connection one needs to think over nothing more than the fact that the body is kept alive by nutrition and care within socially organized institutions, e.g. the family, the workplace. A large proportion of human bodies cease to be during infancy and childhood for lack of food, warmth, sanitation and medical care. In some other societies that is not much the

case. Over one-half of human bodies are stunted in many societies across the globe and this is attributable to the nature of social and political organization and economic development. Human bodies are social products also in their upkeep and ornamentation. Styles of clothing, grooming, hair keeping, beard and mustache keeping, muscle keeping, weight-watching, care of teeth and so on are socially patterned and produced.

The 'God created man and society' paradigm has long been invalidated by sociologists. Emile Durkheim surely comes to the fore here. God and religion were nothing more or less than personification of society, he said. It is not that the god creates and orders society; it is the society which creates and re-shapes the god, he argued. Society 'needs' god in order to order itself. The god, in any case, is a social invention. Max Weber, on the other hand, argued from another angle and said that religion can reshape economy. Other sociologists and economic historians have come to the opposite conclusion as well.

Durkheim also reconceptualized suicide as a sociological category. He pushed away the psychologization, abnormalization and insanization that was endemic to the characterization of suicide. He also pushed away the divinization and mystification that was endemic to the characterization of suicide. Instead, he said, suicide was a social product. Particular kinds of societies produced both a higher or lower rate of suicide and particular kinds of suicide. Thus, suicide and its rate came to be seen as a 'normal' outcome of specific social arrangements. Sociologists also understand and explain witchcraft as outcomes of social transition, uncertainty and misogyny. There are no witches as such. It is particular kinds of societies--societies in particular historical and structural circumstances--that invent witchcraft and witches and burn them at stake.

So also with human consciousness. Consciousness surely has a bio-physiological 'wiring' basis. But what travels through the 'wire', the speed in which it travels and the uses to which that which travels is put to is evidently social. Knowledge is historically and socially produced. Farmers know the botanical world around them well. The urban-dwelling accountant does not possess that kind of knowledge even as she possesses adequate knowledge of her profession. Sociology, as a particular facet and branch of knowledge is a social product. Had it been something natural, divine and so forth, it would very probably have been with the humankind since its birth. That it came into being during the middle of the 19th century during a period of huge social transition in Europe tells us that birth was tied to the nature of social transition there. It was also very probably tied to the specific nature of the transition there. One could argue that sociology had been with us in Ancient Greece or Middle-Age Mesopotamia or even parts of Europe during the birth of the Renaissance and Reformation and Capitalism, but that would surely further buttress the argument that sociology, like any other consciousness, knowledge and 'mental product,' is essentially a social product.

Thus it is that sociologists can work on birth and human body, religion and god, suicide and witchcraft and consciousness and Sociology because all of them are constituted, among others, historically and socially. It is this ability to see the social in all 'things' around us, including nonsocial-looking 'things' that is the key hallmark of a sociologist. 'Non-social' things are social after all! Essentially, there is *nothing* that is not social as long as human *act* in reference to it—including inanimate, fictitious and 'imaginary' things! Just try to think of a single 'thing' that is not social in any manner or form. I bet you will fail! This also shows, among others, that there is really no limit on

what students can write their Master's or doctoral thesis on. The point is to be able to see the social and work on it in whatever one wishes to work on.

3. Questioning the constitution of society

Seeing the social in every facet of our life and everything around us, including what we imagine, as discussed above, is the first step in becoming a sociologist. That opens the gateway to sociology. Sociology essentially implies a dialogue among the like-minded, i.e. among sociologists and others similarly-minded, about how best to comprehend, describe and explain society and social processes. Some would also say that social criticism is an intrinsic component of doing sociology.

Sociology is itself nothing more than a disciplined, historically, structurally and cross-culturally informed, relatively abstract and theorized mode of seeing and investigating patterns in the concrete social lives that we all live. Let me, in order to elaborate the preceding sentence, go on to illustrate the kind of questions that sociologists ask in order to become sociological.

- How and when do particularly patterned social lives—specific and institutionalized ways of believing and acting--come into being? In other words, how were the rather patterned lives that we lead created and recreated? What were the forces which created it and what are the forces that have recreated it and transformed it since? Does it look likely that the existing pattern will hold on for the next year or decade or generation or century? Why does it look that way?
- Are the neighboring and other as well as the emerging 'global society' similarly patterned? What are the salient differences among the various societies in this respect?

Why are the differences there? And, to the extent that they are similar, why are they similar? Which of these patterns or institutions are closely related, and in sharp contradiction with, which? Why are they closely related or in sharp contradiction? When and why did the contradiction become sharper or blunter?

- What are the subterranean forces, i.e. beyond the immediately identifiable 'empirical' surface, which make the patterns move and shake? Is it because of the specific nature of social relationships--among individuals, households, settlements, classes, caste and ethnic and gender and other groups, business enterprises, regions, nations—that the patterns move and shake? What is the specificity of these social relationships?
- What are the norms and values governing the patterns, institutions, transactions and the like? How differentiated is the society in relations to institutions, occupations and professions, as well as positions and roles? How unequal is the society across various social groups in relation to various dimensions of social stratification? What is the history and causality of differentiation and stratification? What is the nature of social relationship among individuals and groups that make up the society? How is it changing? How do individuals and groups in society read the patterns and act toward them?
- Is such reading and acting uniform? Is it diverse? Why is it so? How are the actors—individuals in various social positions and predicaments, political parties, ethnic groups, regional groups, classes, etc—seeking to change themselves and the society they live in? How are they trying to change it? How successful have they been? Why?
- How do macro structures influence individuals and intermediate and micro structures? And what is the nature of pressure from individuals and micro and intermediate

structures directed to the macro structures? What is the nature of interaction among these 'levels' of society?

It is one of the key tenets of sociology that the society is not what it seems to be. Things are not what they seem. Good Sociology, therefore, calls for diving beneath the surface, beneath the appearance. Very 'disparate' and 'unlike' institutions may in fact be closely connected such that the two almost necessarily go together. The relationship between institutions, as it were, needs to be excavated. While marriage and resource ownership may seem to belong to very disparate domains, it is the case, for example, that forms of marriage are closely connected to forms of ownership of resources. Size of family is generally closely related to forms of ownership of resources also. Capitalism and wage labor go together. Separation of production from household is characteristic both to capitalism and socialism but not of other modes of production. The caste system generally weakens as the regime of wage labor acquires strength and as urbanization gathers steam. Good sociology, therefore, is not describing the 'obvious'. Nor does sociological explanation consist in bringing together and stringing the 'obvious' as causes and effects, e.g. illiteracy as the cause of poverty. Sociological explanation of poverty may well bring a host of historical, global and structural factors as 'causative' forces.

The causality that good sociology seeks to uncover is one of 'stringed sequence'. It believes that there is not only one-shot cause and effect but sequenced causes and sequenced effects. In effect it asks a series of why's and seeks serial answers. It is not satisfied with the finding that more educated wage workers have, on the average, have higher wage rates. Having found this out, it asks a minimum of two further questions. First, it asks what else contributes to higher wage rates. Second, it asks why the workers with higher wage rates got to be more educated in the first place. Was it parental

income or was it gender or was it something else? Or a number of specific attributes at once? And, if it was parental income it might then ask what it is specifically in income that leads to higher education for children? If it was gender, it might ask: What is it about gender that translates into opportunities for higher education? Would different rules of residence or rules of inheritance change it? What is the cross-cultural evidence there? It might also ask: Is it the case everywhere that the equation higher education = higher wage rate holds? It might also ask was this always the case that the equation held in the same society 20 years ago. Forty years ago? And so on. It might, of course, ask many further related questions.

Good sociology also calls for a broad, sweeping and totalizing vision. Some of this has already been discussed above. In essence, it calls for a comparative *perspective*. Not that each and every piece of sociological inquiry and text must be composed within an explicitly historically and social-spatially comparative framework. But it would certainly be good if the framework is implicitly based or is at least cognizant of diverse historical and social-spatial learning of human experience. Good sociology attempts to learn from the immensely diverse historical and cross-cultural lessons in relation to social organization and social process.

4. Dialoguing with masters

C. Wright Mills, as we all know, wrote perceptively about what he called sociological imagination. He said, 'The sociological imagination allows its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals .... The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relation between the two within society' (Mills, 1959: 5). The implication for us here today would be

that rendering research sociological implies exploring the nature of the larger and encompassing historical-structural conditions which shape the lives and fears and hopes of individuals and groups we encounter in our daily lives and do research upon. Mills, accordingly, emphasized comprehending and researching 'the interplay of man and society, of biography and history and self and world' (1959: 4). The exploration of how one is linked to the other or how one constitutes the other would be nothing if not sociological. Making research sociological, therefore, according to Mills, calls for exploring the nature of the tie between the individual and society. We could say that he was calling for exploring the relationship, in more current language, between micro and macro—not only individual and society but also family and economy, citizen and state, consumer and market, etc.

Mills was more of a structuralist than an agency-emphasizing sociologist. He often saw personal predicament as historically and structurally constituted. Even then he had significant sociological space open for consciously and deliberatively acting individual and for broader agency and how this would shape structure and history. He saw that all of these were central to a sociological imagination.

In a somewhat similar vein, Peter Berger has argued that the sociologist's 'consuming interest remains in the world of men, their institutions, their history, their passions … He will naturally be interested in the events that engage man's ultimate beliefs, their moments of tragedy an grandeur and ecstasy. But he will be fascinated by the commonplace, the everyday' (1963: 29). These are all stuffs which are manifestly sociological. Do note that the emphasis on history and structure, so prominent in Mills, is absent or very weak in Berger. Mills is equally, if not more, interested in how individual and society constitute each other. Berger, as a phenomenological sociologist is expressedly more interested

in how individuals shape and reshape society. (Durkheim, of course, comes from the other pole. He centrestages society and views the individual as constituted by the structure and not as agents who actively make or shape their society.) What this implies for students is that Sociology does not have to be defined in very narrow terms. The sociological, in this sense, can be defined rather broadly and in multiple ways. Student and other researchers, thus, have a wide leeway even as they also bear the obligation to comprehend powerfully diverse—and sometimes highly contradictory—arguments made by sociologists.

Rendering research sociological implies attention to a few other related considerations. Mills emphasized the connection between individual and society (and biography and history, and self and world). This was the fundamental sociological enterprise, i.e. the key mode of sociologizing one's research. While not explicit in Mills, we cannot but believe that exploring the nature of relationship between and among diverse groups, groups and social institutions, two or more institutions, and institutions and the more encompassing structure were sociologically significant engagements for him. In essence, he may be said to have extremely highly valued the sociological significance of the exploration of the nature of social *relationship,* social *institutions* and the nature of the *encompassing social structure*. Similarly, exploring correspondence, simultaneity and sequencing in history—of two or more types of social relationships, institutions and so forth—would have been dear to him in terms of its sociological significance. Further, while the terms and the language are more recent, he certainly valorized the sociological significance of linking the micro and the macro.

Let me re-emphasize the significance of thinking in terms of social relationships, social institutions and social structure—and, of course, micro and macro, agency and structure and,

above all, of social change. I suppose the emphasis will be easier to comprehend when set against the nature of the 'usual' Master's theses. In particular, in the theses on 'Socioeconomic Status …' that many students write and their advisers condone, one finds information on household landholding, income, agricultural production, etc. in some others, there are information on increase or decrease of pasture, forest, literacy, access to health services, etc. All of these may be important information in their own right. But the treatment most likely will *not* be sociological. Income level or increase or decrease in the level of income is *not* sociological in itself. What renders it sociological is linking with the nature of social relationships, social institutions, social structures and social change as correlates, causes or consequences of income and its rise or fall. The key issue is not income as such or and its rise and fall but what social features led to it and/or how social relationships and institutions will change as a consequence of the rise and fall of income. Similarly with forest cover, productivity, literacy rate, and so on. Unless the nature of social relationships, social institutions and social structures and changes therein are invoked as correlates, causes or consequences of the level of these attributes and their rise and fall, one is not doing sociology. Has changing income altered the relationship with the members of a family, between men and women, among different caste, ethnic and other groups, between migrants and non-migrants, between villages and towns, between landowners and tenants or wage workers … and so on? That is the sociological question.

It is not absolutely necessary but useful and potentially highly productive to internalize and utilize concepts, categories and conceptual frameworks utilized by well-known sociologists. They have had much more training in Sociology compared to the students. Such concepts, categories and frameworks force us to 'see' aspects of society in sociologically significant

ways. Students would lose the benefit of knowledgeable masters of the discipline were they to neglect the use of such sociological aids. This means, of course, that it is crucially important to study and learn from books. There is really no substitute for reading texts and other sociological books. In addition, reading them would also allow students to enter into a dialogue with the sociologists and their concepts, categories and frameworks. The students could then reaffirm (or refute) the utility of such concepts, categories and frameworks or enter into their criticism based on one's own study and research.

And, then, social change, i.e. change in social relationships, institutions and structures in Nepal, other specific locations as well as globally are, particularly in these times of historical shift, sociologically extremely important. Economic, political and cultural domains are part of the social. Students would be welcome to write about them, as long as these can be shown to impinge on social relationships, institutions and structures. We now live in historically shifting and therefore sociologically exciting times. This makes Sociology more pleasant than would normally be the case.

4. Learning from and reconfiguring the global

Finally, there is one more issue I want to go into. The first is that we are sociologists. The Master's thesis is, first and foremost, a thesis on *Sociology*. You become a Master in Sociology when you complete your thesis. It is only secondarily that your thesis is on the problem you have identified. Nor is your thesis on this village or settlement or any other bound physical location. Your discipline is Sociology and you are a global citizen and a global student. You do not get a M.A. in Sociology of Nepal but on Sociology as such. You, therefore, have to make all possible efforts to justify the degree you have been granted. That is,

you have to earn it. The widespread tendency among students to severely limit their imagination and locate their study to a particular physical location must, therefore, be severely discouraged. The students themselves must become the principal agents of this discouragement. But teachers, the department, the subject committee, the university system and the entire academic environment has to discourage this practice. In the first and by far the most important instance, Sociology theses must pertain to a *social* location, a social feature, a social relationship, a social institution, a process of social change and so forth and not a physical location. A physical location is necessary in order to empirically and concretely draw and detail the framework, generate information and so forth. A physical location, for most—although not all—sociologists is, so to speak, a laboratory or a peg to hang the coat on and nothing more. One does not write about a laboratory. Nor a peg. That would be neither sociological nor even interesting. One writes about the social world with the help of the laboratory or a peg. The primary purpose of a physical location is to provide a concrete illustration of a more general social condition and process which itself has not merely local but universal bearing. Nepal is *not* a unique, un-generalizable social location. And no settlement within Nepal is so either. Indeed, no social habitat, social institution and social relationship as well as no norm and value are unique. Efforts to prove such uniqueness are bound not only to be extremely unproductive and frustrating but also to fail. Extremely limited empirical studies without wider economic, political and cultural significance are absolutely boring at worst and at the level of interesting reporting at best. This does not mean that concrete social situations do not have a historical and structural specificity which sets them apart from some others or renders them 'unique' in a way. But no social particularity or specificity is so unique that no general formulation or experience can illuminate it. If there is no generality and abstractness to

speak of there would be no sociology. There would be no social studies. There would certainly be no social sciences. There would only be so many disparate local stories. That certainly would not be sociology.

On the other hand, the local, because it has a certain level of specificity, may well contribute to reconfiguring of the global. The local is not merely a microcosm of the global. The global partially constitutes the local even as it is constituted by the internal structure of the very many locals and the relationship among the very many locals. It is, therefore, important to learn how one penetrates into and articulates with the other.

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